DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 914 PS 029 627

AUTHOR	Kain, Daniel L., Ed.
TITLE	Focus on Middle School (Ages 11-13): A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community, 1999-2000.
INSTITUTION	Association for Childhood Education International, Olney, MD.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	34p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for Childhood Education International, 17904 Georgia Avenue, Suite 215, Olney, MD 20832.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Focus on Middle School; v12 n1-4 Fall 1999-Sum 2000
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Environment; Curriculum; *Gun Control; *Integrated Curriculum; *Middle School Students; *Middle School Teachers; *Middle Schools; Museums; Newsletters; *Oral History; Student Evaluation; Student Needs; Teacher Role; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS	Student Engagement; Volunteerism

ABSTRACT

This document consists of four issues of a newsletter for educators at the middle level. The issues each contain a main article, along with shorter articles and regular columns. The Fall 1999 issue focuses on the middle school movement and presents part 1 of an interview with John Lounsbury on the progress of the movement. A sidebar article discusses recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics on guns and children. The executive board vice president's column discusses meeting middle grade students' needs with opportunities. The Winter 1999 issue addresses the role of middle school teachers in part 2 of the interview with John Lounsbury. A sidebar article discusses problem-based learning as a model for integrating the middle school curriculum, and the vice president's column discusses student volunteerism. The Spring 2000 issue focuses on teachers' experiences of the transition from a classic junior high model to a middle school model. The vice president's column deals with raising reading expectations. The Summer 2000 issue reflects upon teachers' role in developing and implementing the middle school curriculum, conducting assessments, and creating a classroom environment. The issue also highlights the use of oral history in middle school education, describing a classroom oral history project. The vice president's column discusses museum exhibits as a model for student engagement. Some newsletter issues include listings of new Web resources and conference information. (KB)

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ED 455 914

Focus on Middle School (Ages 11-13): A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

by

Daniel L. Kain, Ed.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Fall 1999 • Vol. 12, No. 1

Focus on Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

American Academy of Pediatrics Addresses Guns and Children

The tragic Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, last spring is evidence that gun violence continues to be a major public health epidemic in schools and in the family. According to American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) President Joel J. Alpert, MD, FAAP, almost one out of five pediatricians nationwide has treated a young gunshot victim. To counter this growing epidemic of gun violence, the AAP offers the following measures to counter violence and ways pediatricians can work with the schools to identify those children at risk of perpetrating violence.

Guns and Children

Every day, 13 American children and adolescents die in gun-related homicides, suicides, and accidents. Many more suffer permanent injuries.

continued on page 3 . . .

Organizational Wizardry or Educational Wisdom?

John Lounsbury Reflects on the Middle School Movement

Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ

John H. Lounsbury has been a central force in the middle school movement for decades. His accomplishments can be seen in a legacy of thoughtful publications about middle schools and young adolescents. Just as important, his mark on the field is evident in his guidance of other writers and researchers. The respect he commands can be seen in the fact that the most prestigious award in middle level education is called the John H. Lounsbury Award, and that the school of education at his

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home institution, Georgia College and State University, has been named the John H. Lounsbury School of Education.

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Dr. Lounsbury is what any participant at the National Middle School Association's (NMSA) annual conference could have observed year after year. John Lounsbury's boundless energy is evident to all. He bounces from session to session; his passion for a student-friendly middle school is infectious. Whether guiding teachers through the NMSA bookstore or explaining the importance of democratic education, John is a magnet for committed educators.

To declare itself the National Middle School Association, even while it was in its own infancy and without a budget or substantial membership, was a courageous move by the Midwest Middle School Association.

I spoke with Dr. Lounsbury recently about where the middle school movement has made progress and where it is headed as we enter a new millennium. Part one of this interview is printed in this issue of *Focus on Middle School*. Part two of the interview will appear in the next issue.

DK: Could you identify a few events that mark what we call the middle school movement over the last 30 years or so?

JL: Don Eichhorn's book, simply titled *The Middle School*, published in 1966, was one of the earliest landmarks and began to give the middle school an identity apart from the junior high school. *The Emergent Middle School*, by Bill Alexander and associates, which was published in 1968, was another very important early publication.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) appointed the "Emerging Adolescent Learner Council" in 1969 and its activities did much to spread the message. Don Eichhorn and Connie Toepfer were among the leaders in that group.

The next big event was the creation of the National Middle School Association. To declare itself the National Middle School Association, even while it was in its own infancy and without a budget or substantial membership, was a courageous move by the Midwest Middle School Association. Gordon Vars, Tom Gatewood, Hal Gaddis, and Glenn Maynard were among those committed early leaders who took this giant step.

Then there was the National Middle School Resource Center, established by Bob Malinka in the '70s under a grant given to the Indianapolis public schools. This resource was important in supporting the middle school effort. Bob collected and made available materials about scheduling, advisory programs, developmental characteristics, and anything else he could get his hands on. With the help of a copying machine (often, just a ditto machine), he was able to fill the terrible void in professional literature dealing with the middle school.

When Paul George sponsored the National Middle School Leadership Seminar prior to the ASCD meeting in Miami in 1976, this represented a big step to move the middle school concept along. This meeting, held in Gainesville and attended by over 300 participants, drew together a substantial number of recognized leaders and created among them something of a commonality, and helped to coalesce much of the emerging leadership.

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Therefore, the AAP says that handguns, deadly air guns, and assault weapons should be banned. A gun should never be in the home where a child lives and plays. However, if there is a gun in the household, it should be unloaded and locked away from children. Ammunition also must be kept in a separate, locked location.

Identifying Children At Risk

If a child is talking about violence or suicide, it is a call for help and a warning sign. Children are learning to use violence to deal with anger and conflict, with devastating results when linked with guns. Pediatricians, school officials, and others must identify those children who exhibit violent behaviors or associated risk factors, such as threats, weapon carrying, depression, bullying, or withdrawal, as exhibited by a lack of connection with peer groups. Other risk groups include children who have been victimized by child abuse and neglect or those who have witnessed violence.

The response to risk behaviors, such as weapon carrying, must be swift, firm, and comprehensive. Once children are identified, there must be appropriate follow-up. Pediatricians must work with school and law enforcement officials to find appropriate counseling services in schools. If services such as counseling are not available in the schools, then these services should be readily accessible in the community.

The Impact of the Media

More than 1,000 studies attest to a causal connection between the media and violent, aggressive behaviors in some children. In fact, the average American child has viewed 200,000 acts of violence on television by the age of 18. Children need to know that violence on TV, in the movies, on the Internet, and in video games is not real. In real life, children have alternatives when dealing with conflict and anger.

Programs on media literacy and conflict resolution should be incorporated into school health education curriculum. In addition, parents should discuss what children see in the media and become aware of their children's media habits. The AAP recommends that parents also limit their children's TV viewing to one to two hours per day.

Community Response

Pediatricians support the schools in the formation of crisis response teams. AAP members are experts in the area of child behavior from birth through young adulthood, and these pediatricians are committed to preventing the growing epidemic of violence against children.

The 55,000 members of the American Academy of Pediatrics call on state and federal government officials to create legislation that prevents gun violence. The AAP supports all efforts to ban guns from any environment where children live and play.

This article was provided by the American Academy of Pediatrics, an organization of 55,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. For more information, contact AAP, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., Elk Grove, IL 60007-1098; or visit their Web site at www.aap.org.

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DK: Were those primarily university educators?
JL: Primarily, but not exclusively. The group included Bob Malinka, Hal Gaddis, Don Eichhorn, Gordon Vars, Tom Gatewood, Jim Fox, Bill Alexander, Lou Romano, Mary Compton, and many others.

Another important event was the publication of Joan Lipsitz's book, *Growing Up Forgotten*, in 1977. This book was instrumental in bringing attention to the middle level and the degree to which young adolescents had been slighted not only in education, but also in medicine, law enforcement, and other aspects of life.

Perhaps the excessive emphasis we have given to early adolescence as a unique period is somewhat forgivable, considering that until the last three decades this age was not recognized as a developmental period at all.

DK: I think it came before her other book, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, didn't it?
JL: Well before. It was a research effort to look at what our society was doing to serve this age level. Of course, *Successful Schools* has become a classic. The publication of *This We Believe* in 1982 also deserves mention. I best stop here before I overdo the history bit.

DK: Some people have said that the idea of a unique middle schooler—or the middle school child as a unique person developmentally—is very much culturally bound, and that the movement is built on a questionable basis. What are your thoughts on that?
JL: I think we have, perhaps, overemphasized the distinctiveness of the age of early adolescence in reaction to the fact that previously the age had not been recognized at all. I believe the early adolescence period does have distinctive characteristics, and that the age does have special importance. However, it is not altogether a distinctive period, but rather a part of a continuum of growth and development. For example, many aspects of the physical development of early adolescents that become evident at age 11 or 12 actually begin at age 8 or 9. Perhaps the excessive emphasis we have given to early adolescence as a unique period is somewhat forgivable, considering that until the last three decades this age was not recognized as a developmental period at all. Our language, unfortunately, only recognizes infants, children, adolescents, and adults. There was no single term to label the significant transition period between childhood and adolescence, although one doesn't jump from childhood immediately into adolescence, and there are great differences between an 11-year-old and a 16-year-old. But I do think that we have at times overplayed that distinctiveness.

DK: When we bring that issue back into perspective, do we then lose some of the claim for creating a unique kind of schooling experience?
JL: Yes and no. The middle school concept is essentially programmatic, not organizational. Unfortunately, the public has viewed the middle

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school as an organizational arrangement, and while early reform efforts tend to involve school organization, at the heart of the middle school concept are principles of learning—principles based on what we know about how kids learn best. And these principles are essentially universal: they are applicable in elementary school, in the high school, and even beyond. The value of involving learners in what they are doing is a universal concept, although rarely practiced. Kindergarten teachers apply this principle far more than middle-grades teachers do. When you really examine what the "middle school concept" is, you find a collection of principles of how best to organize educational experiences based on what we know about learning, and about the nature and needs of learners.

There are some distinctive aspects or points of emphasis. For instance, the concept of exploration is particularly important at this age level because of the nature of young adolescents. Children in the 2nd grade are not able to explore in the same way, because their minds have not developed to the point where they can see ahead, speculate, or hypothesize in the ways that exploration among young adolescents demands. Individuals at this level become more retrospective, curious, and adventuresome. The middle school, therefore, does have a particular responsibility to provide exploratory experiences.

DK: In your experience with visiting middle schools and talking to people, would you characterize these schools as having made the programmatic changes more than the organizational ones?

JL: Far from it! The greatest single failing of the middle school movement to date is that we have utilized our organizational wizardry far more than our educational wisdom. We have done an admirable job of providing independent units of grades 6, 7, and 8, or 7 and 8, or 5 through 8, and labeling them "middle school," but we have failed, to date, to make what Larry Cuban called second-level changes. We haven't made the changes that really break the mold. We've organized teams, but teams for the most part haven't taken advantage of what teaming makes possible.

DK: Why do you suppose that is?

JL: The limitations of humans, the natural resistance to change, the insecurity of people in trying out new things. The major problem, as I see it, is that we have institutionalized passive learning. That is to say, we have built into the system conditions that perpetuate passive learning, which is exactly the opposite of what the middle school advocates. Everything from the way we furnish schools with rows of desks facing a teacher to a canned curriculum of textbooks essentially perpetuates the idea of "teaching is telling and learning is listening." And, we haven't really tackled that problem even as we have organized teams and done good things with advisory and exploratory programs. By and large, the school still is operating pretty much on a passive learning assumption.

The greatest single failing of the middle school movement to date is that we have utilized our organizational wizardry far more than our educational wisdom.

DK: There are probably a lot of middle school teachers out there now who are like a generation of

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middle school teachers; their whole career is middle school. What can give us hope that people will change?

JL: Well, this is a rather negative way to put it, but I think the survival of our society, our democratic way of life, is closely tied to what we can do to reform schools and implement the middle school concept. We cannot afford to continue alienating major portions of our young people, losing them to gangs and to lives without hope. We've got to make public schooling more relevant and meaningful; help students become well-rounded persons, and ethical and responsible citizens; and not focus so much on simply improving test scores and handling the narrow aspects of schooling.

I think the middle school is indeed the hope for reforming not only education, but also society. Society, as I view it, is in a serious state. America has lost a sense of commonality, a vision of democratic living and commitment to the general welfare. We've become selfish, a nation of enablers and apologists. But I believe middle level education is the one place now where we can indeed change people. And, if we can change them at this period, when young people are deciding who they are and forming the attitudes that will direct their behavior for the rest of their lives, we can make a difference. I don't think the high school can do it; it comes too late. I don't think the elementary school can do it; it's too early. I don't think the federal government can do it; it doesn't have that kind of influence and support. I don't think the churches can do it, although I wish they could; but they are no longer able to play the dominant role that they once did in determining the values and attitudes of our citizens. I don't think communities can do it anymore. I don't think the family can do it anymore, because it isn't the institution that it once was. But the middle school, which enrolls students in the formative period of life, is in a position to redirect society.

DK: I've recently heard of a number of schools going back to the junior high model. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but it seems to be some kind of rejection of the middle school concept. Any thoughts on why that would be happening?

JL: It is happening because people are rejecting the incompleteness of the middle school, not the middle school concept itself. We've got to help people recognize that the failure of middle schools to achieve higher test scores is due to the fact that we have *not* fully implemented the principles of the middle school. And there is this sad obsession with test scores that has pushed the return to junior high models. Parents and legislators generally put undue stock in the validity of standardized test scores as measures of a school's quality. And it may be true that test scores have not gone up, although this is a matter of debate. I think the public is being misled about the importance of test scores. But even if achievement scores don't go up in the middle grades, there are developmental psychologists who would point out that if you simply hold scores where they are during this critical period of growth and development, you really are doing pretty well. When you recognize what young adolescents are going through in developing their social relationships and adjusting to their changing bodies and all of their new emotions, doing as well as they've been doing isn't all that bad. Maybe we ought not to assume that academic progress will be uniformly upward during this period of life.

But even putting all this aside, I think the real problem is the one we identified earlier: People may think they are rejecting the middle school concept, but they are only rejecting the inadequate implementation of it and the persistence of junior high practices. Most middle schools, if you really look at them carefully, still are a great deal like junior high schools, only with a different grade level and a different name. This is even true of many schools that have teams, and teaming is only found in somewhat over 50 percent of all middle level grades. The shift back to the junior high model is primarily a reaction to the purported lower test scores and the demand for accountability. Politicians and various business leaders are trying to bully schools into improving their test scores, and in doing that they are harming the group that most needs help—the group that doesn't score well on such tests.

Look for Part II of this interview in the Winter 1999 *Focus on Middle School.*

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From the Vice President

meeting middle grade students' needs with opportunities

These days, creating responsive and effective instruction for middle grade students is a challenging, yet critical, task. We must improve the educational experiences of students ages 10 to 14 in creative ways so that they will make a successful transition to high school and be able to achieve high standards.

These young adults have many and varied needs. Using research from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Middle School Association, and other groups, a Minneapolis Public Schools Middle Grades Task Force developed reform efforts designed to improve student achievement.

This column highlights part of the Minneapolis Public Schools Platform, focusing on needs of early adolescents as they relate to four types of developmental characteristics: intellectual, psychological, physical, and social/emotional.

INTELLECTUAL

Early adolescents need:

- *to explore and be challenged
- *time for structured peer group activities
- *high academic expectations and structure for success.

Educators can provide opportunities for:

- *active and interactive learning; in-depth, engaging projects
- *cooperative learning experiences that involve peer group work
- *instruction and curriculum that is relevant to their lives.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Early adolescents need:

- *to belong to a group
- *to develop their own sense of self-worth
- *clear expectations and consequences.

Educators can provide opportunities for:

- *active learning activities, such as games, group discussions, field trips, role play, experimentation, and discovery
- *learning to cope with and help develop character, ethics, beliefs, values, perceptions, and interests
- *consistent, clear messages addressing the real-life needs of students.

5th- and 6th-grade students on an all-day bike

PHYSICAL

Early adolescents need:

- *to engage in challenging physical activity
- *to be protected from embarrassment
- *information about their bodies and the impact of physical appearance on their lives.

Educators can provide opportunities for:

- *activities that permit and encourage physical movement, active interactions, and development
- *safe and structured guided experiences
- *nutrition, sex, and drug education.

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL

Early adolescents need:

- *frequent affirmation from adults
- *to talk and be listened to
- *to feel safe and in control of their lives.

Educators can provide opportunities for:

- *service learning, to develop a sense of responsibility;
- *interactions with positive adult role models
- *learning consistency and coping skills, with a focus on how to make good choices and on appreciating diversity.

Although adolescence can be a turbulent time, the opportunities for learning are great. Barton Open is a K-8 central city school in Minneapolis, and our middle school students have opportunities to interact with elementary students, as well as with their peers. As educators, we can promote opportunities in and out of school that will promote the growth of our young people as scholars, good citizens, and increasingly competent, responsible young adults.

—M. J. Savaiano, Vice President
Representing Middle Childhood

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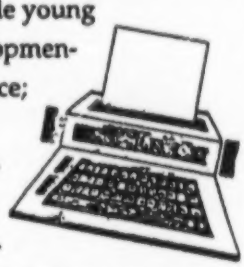
Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Middle School* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on young adolescents and effective middle level school practices. Topics may include young adolescent development and developmentally appropriate educational practice; descriptions of materials and programs; suggestions for implementing middle school concepts, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, and exploratory programs; issues affecting young adolescents; and challenges facing at-risk populations.



Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Middle School* Editor:

Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University,
P.O. Box 5774, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5774.

Focus on Middle School
Fall 1999, Vol. 12, No. 1

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Winter 1999 • Vol. 12, No. 2

Focus on Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Problem-Based Learning As a Model for Integrating the Curriculum

Daniel L. Kain

Just as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1990) is not a book about junior high teachers, problem-based learning is not a description of professional development at the middle school level. Problem-based learning (PBL) is one of the most promising avenues for providing students relevant and engaging learning experiences. At the same time, problem-based learning offers a means for students to enhance their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as their ability to work with peers. Perhaps most exciting for the middle level educator, problem-based learning provides a mechanism for integrating the curriculum, while maintaining high standards for achievement and close connections to the mandated curriculum.

How Does PBL Work?

Traditional instruction features a presentation of information by the teacher, followed by practice or extension by the students. Problem-based learning turns this process upside-down. Students encounter carefully selected but ill-structured problems before they receive any instruction in the particular focus

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Rethinking the Role of Middle School Teachers:

John Lounsbury Reflects on the Middle School Movement, Part 2

Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ

Few people have had the sort of impact on the middle school movement that John Lounsbury has had. His passion for educating children in relevant, democratic ways is evident in all he does. In addition, Dr. Lounsbury has continually encouraged new voices to be heard. As he says, "One of the things that has given me the most satisfaction is being of assistance to fledgling authors or young teachers by giving them opportunities."

In the last issue of *Focus on Middle School*, John Lounsbury reflected on the fact that the middle school concept has been implemented primarily as an organizational issue, rather than as a change in the education experiences of young adolescents. In his view, schools have done much to institutionalize passive learning, violating what we know about how children learn best. This issue continues the interview with Dr. Lounsbury.

DK: You've made the case that passive learning is a real problem in middle schools. This implies that we have to do something about the teachers in middle schools. Am I wrong about that?

JL: No, you're right. We need to encourage teachers to exert more personal and professional initiative, and to see themselves as more than followers of a cookbook recipe. We need to help them see themselves as the right persons, the only persons [who are] in a position to help kids decide about what to study and how to

study it. We need to help teachers become comfortable with making major decisions about curriculum and activities. Teachers need to have the courage to do what their professional heart and their professional preparation tells them is right for kids, even if it means violating much of the bureaucratic institutionalization of passive learning and prescribed curricula. We must then invest in teachers' professional development and help them to improve their own self-concept and their own self-esteem. Teachers don't feel as good about themselves as they ought to. Teachers generally are better than the systems they operate in.

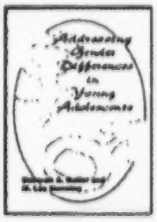
Part of the problem is that we've followed a military model in our schools. The superintendent is the general, and he has his staff officers, the administrators. They have their lieutenants, the teachers, and then the teachers have the privates, the students. It's a military model, when in fact education ought to be built on the exact reverse: bottom up. The *students* are first and their servants are the teachers, who are served by the principals, who in turn are served by the superintendent. While not altogether realistic, it is a view we need to move toward, and so we should get away from the industrial or military model that works from the top down and has the students on the bottom rung. In fact, students are the reason for the whole operation.

DK: As we move into the 21st century, what do you expect to happen to the middle school movement in the opening years of this new millennium?

JL: Optimistic as I am, I believe that after we gradually live through the accountability push and the test score obsession, we will see a more complete and widespread movement toward the kind of reform the middle school has been advocating for 30 years now. We will see high schools, as many of them already are, instituting teaming, advisory groups, personalized learning, and integrated curriculum. We will see service learning inserted not as an add-on requirement, but as a major means of advancing academic understandings, as well as being the best way of meeting other desirable education goals. These goals cannot easily be met in classrooms where teachers only talk to kids.

Eventually, I would see the gradual elimination of advisory programs as separate entities, because as the curriculum becomes more integrated and student centered, the affective needs and concerns of young people will become melded into the cognitive aspects of the curriculum. That change may be slow to come, but I think by the year 2020, you won't see advisory programs as entities in most middle schools. That is not to say that we do not need them now. Currently, in many middle schools, the traditional curriculum simply provides no place to address students' concerns about their personal and social development.

Resources for Middle School Educators



Addressing Gender Differences in Young Adolescents

Advocates of gender-equitable middle level schools recognize the progress achieved during the past decade, but realize that more changes are long overdue. Butler and Manning explain what gender differences are, how they affect learning, why both girls and boys need their gender differences acknowledged, and ways to address these differences. Deborah A. Butler and M. Lee Manning. 1998. 133 pp. No. 1985 $22 *($14.40 ACEI members)*

Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools

Theorists have suggested that learners' developmental levels should provide the basis for planning and designing the curriculum, as well as the teaching/learning environment. Translating theory into practice, this book examines early adolescence as a developmental period and explains the characteristics of 10- to 14-year-olds. M. Lee Manning. 1993. 112 pp. No. 1931. $18.50 *($12 ACEI members)*

Middle School: Readings from Childhood Education

This collection of articles has been compiled in response to the demand for information on topics that concern the middle school community. Articles include: *The Role of Teacher Collaboration in School Reform, Prognosis for Homeless Children and Adolescents, What Works in Urban Middle Schools, AIDS Education,* and *Teenage Pregnancy.* 1998. 45 pp. No. 2980. $9.25 *($6 ACEI members)*

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area. After immersing themselves in all the issues of the problem, the students propose a solution. Teachers follow up this investigation with a debriefing that addresses both the content embedded in the problem and the problem-solving process itself. This approach to learning, which is popular in professional education (especially medical education), allows students to assume the role of a problem-solver relevant to the area of study. Important content and skills are embedded in an engaging situation.

Research comparing medical students using PBL with those in traditional programs gives us reason to consider using this teaching method. There may be a slight advantage to traditional approaches in terms of short-term knowledge retention, but PBL holds a definite advantage in terms of long-term knowledge retention (Gallagher, 1997). Furthermore, students who experience the PBL approach are more apt to apply their knowledge in new situations, and they have more positive attitudes about learning, as well as about the subjects they study (Bridges & Hallinger, 1992). If there is a possibility for greater retention of knowledge, enhanced problem-solving skills, and more positive attitudes, then we ought to consider PBL.

Integration: Way Station or Core Process?

While curriculum integration is one of the central features of the "middle school concept," critics have been pointing out that little integration actually occurs (Beane, 1990), and that which *does* occur is often a diversion from the actual curriculum—what Capelluti and Brazee (1992) call a "way station." Problem-based learning offers a different perspective for middle school teachers in their quest for meaningful connections. In place of the accidental topical connections often used to organize integrated units, PBL encourages students to make natural connections among subject areas as they solve real-life problems. Consider the contrast between two possible units as the English teacher might present them to a middle school team:

Topical: "Let's do a unit on kites. The kids can write kite poems for me. Sherry can do the history of kites. Michael can have them calculate the heights and distances flown. Carolyne can have them examine the science of flight. What do you think?"

PBL: "The City Council is trying to decide where to place the overpass. Let's design a unit where the kids investigate this same problem and make a proposal to the Council on the optimal placement. They'll have to study some big ideas from each of our areas. For English, they'll need to understand how to organize information and make a coherent presentation. In social studies, they can investigate both the functioning of city governments and the role of geography in the community—maybe something about the historic role of the rail system here as well. As math students, they'll have to devise a way of representing traffic flow patterns, and they'll need to understand cost analysis at a basic level. The science component will include at least some investigation into the impact of new roads on the environment, and maybe kids could push this out to alternative means of transportation."

The distinction between these two approaches is that in the former approach, teachers do a lot of stretching to make surface connections among their subjects. In the latter approach, teachers face the possibility of using core ideas from their subject areas to resolve real issues. This does not eliminate the need for teachers to talk to each other. They must still carefully select problems that are engaging and relevant, that are connected to important learning targets, and that are appropriate to the ages and abilities of their students. Then, of course, they must guide their students through a process of problem solving.

The PBL Process

1. Design a problem that has important learning targets embedded in a relevant and authentic situation. Consider both the roles students will assume and the boundaries for what counts as a solution.

continued on page 5 . . .

DK: Let me give you the other side. Do you see any red flags as we approach the 21st century?

JL: I won't call it a red flag, but one of the real handicaps to the full implementation of the middle school concept is the lack of teachers who are trained to be effective middle school teachers. Mediocre teachers can get by in a departmentalized situation, but they cannot get by in a multidisciplinary or integrated curriculum, where students' affective and cognitive concerns are dealt with in an integrated fashion, and where teachers are not only instructors, but also directors of learning and advisers. So the key to the implementation of the middle school is having a vast number of really good quality people who've had the appropriate preparation to be effective middle school teachers. Unfortunately, our public school system, because of [the sheer numbers of students], has had to employ many persons who may be adequate, but are certainly not stellar. And a middle school, to be a real middle school, requires excellent teachers.

Of course, that comment feeds into the concern we mentioned only too briefly: teacher preparation. The slowness of certification to recognize the need for distinctive preparation in dealing with young adolescents continues to be a handicap. High school teacher preparation, of course, also desperately needs essentially the same kinds of activities, courses, and field experiences, although they may not recognize it yet.

DK: I'm wondering if the standards and testing movement in most states is going to push more towards implementing the principles of learning, or will it actually be more reductive?

JL: Currently, the standards movement is a barrier. The standards movement is going to be a handicap until people recognize the message of *Safe To Be Smart* (Wheelock, 1998), a book that makes clear the implications of standards from the standpoint of the classroom teacher. People must also be able to see beyond simply demanding high standards and trying to force them by requirements and regulations. This movement need not be a barrier, because standards are needed. Legislating increased achievement, however, never has worked.

Ultimately, the major barriers to the implementation of the middle school concept might be the lack of understanding on the part of the general public about what constitutes an education (as opposed to simply schooling), and a lack of understanding concerning the nature of young adolescents and their needs. The public and most of the profession do not recognize how most current practices violate what we know about learning, and how these practices limit students' opportunity to receive a full education. The public needs to be educated. That's not meant as an insult, but the public has to be better informed about what an education involves, and of how current school practices are not in keeping with what we know about human growth and development, and the principles of learning.

DK: So, it means we need to broaden our vision of what teaching means to include teaching beyond the school doors?

JL: In my judgment, the essence of the middle school resides in a redefinition of the job of the teacher. The teacher's job is moving from being simply an instructor to becoming a director of learning. This new role has best been phrased by Philip Schlechty, who stated that "the teacher is an inventor of engaging work."

DK: Nice phrase.

JL: But the public still sees the teacher largely as an instructor of a particular subject, a fountain of wisdom, and a passer-on of his or her knowledge to the ignorant student, and that's a gross misrepresentation of what an education is all about. That's how most parents and citizens view education, and if you listen to the dialogue about subjects and courses and everything else, it's usually a continuing call for the institutionalization of passive learning and a reliance on extrinsic motivation. We have to engage the public in a dialogue about the goals of an education in our democratic society and about how present practices fail to address those goals.

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. . . *continued from page 3*

2. Introduce students to the problem with an engaging hook.
3. Guide the students through a problem-solving process (in groups). The basic inquiry structure is to have students address three questions: What do we know? What do we need to know? How can we find out? (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). Work to help students ask questions and seek answers; avoid being the dispenser of knowledge.
4. After students have defined and investigated the problem, provide an authentic format for presenting solutions. This may involve role-playing or drawing on community partners.
5. Assess solutions and engage in debriefing of the problem and students' developing abilities as problem solvers. Consider whether the problem effectively addresses important issues in your curriculum.

But Is There Time?

I anticipate teachers objecting to the use of PBL in the middle school classroom. The objection sounds something like this: "PBL looks like a fine way to learn some things, but there's just too much to cover in math (or history or geography or science or whatever) for me to use it with my students." I issue an invitation to try out PBL. If major medical schools can entrust the education of future physicians to PBL, if engineering programs can be built around PBL, if architects and nurses and school administrators can get an adequate education through PBL, is it not possible that middle school students can learn through this approach? After all, we have spent ages covering material, and the results have not always been what we hoped. Maybe we need to indulge in more "uncoverage" (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) to benefit the long-term achievement of our students. Maybe PBL can be a legitimate avenue for learning in an integrated curriculum.

Resources

How To Use Problem-Based Learning in the Classroom, by Robert Delisle (1997), provides a basic introduction to the approach, as well as sample problems for high school, middle school, and elementary learners.

New Curriculum for New Times, by Neal A. Glasgow (1997), recounts the experience of teachers in a school-within-a-school model who use PBL for interdisciplinary teaching.

Problems As Possibilities, by Linda Torp and Sara Sage (1998), presents another perspective on how to incorporate PBL into the classroom, drawing on the experience of many classroom teachers who have implemented the practice.

Visit the Web site of the Center for Problem-Based Learning (http://www.imsa.edu/team/cpbl/cpbl.html).

Finally, a special issue of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* (Summer 1997, Volume 20, Number 4) illuminates numerous aspects of PBL.

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ACEI News

Your Last Chance This Century!

The Baltimore Conference Committee is planning an extraordinary program. The theme, *Moving Beyond Our Assumptions of Education and Learning: A New Role for Families, Schools & Communities*, reflects the readiness of ACEI to begin the move into the new millennium. Baltimore, our host city, is an exciting and historic city just 35 miles north of Washington, D.C., and promises adventure, learning experiences, and the opportunity to connect with old friends and new at this 108th Annual Conference.

The Opening General Session keynote speaker will be Sylvia C. Chard, Associate Professor, University of Alberta. Chard is the author of several books, including *The Project Approach: Making Curriculum Come Alive* and *The Project Approach: Managing Successful Projects.*

The USA 1999 National Teacher of the Year, Andy Baumgartner, will speak at the Millennial Gala Banquet. As a career teacher, the parent of a learning-disabled child, and a male teaching kindergartners, Baumgartner sees education from varied perspectives.

Of particular interest to readers of *Focus on Middle School* will be the Closing General Session keynote speaker, Dr. Benjamin S. Carson. Carson holds many honors, including American Black Achievement Award Laureate, author, Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, and surgeon. This young doctor holds a special knife in his hand, hoping to save a life. A few years earlier, this same man held another kind of knife, and almost ended a life. As an angry street fighter whose mother married at the age of 13, Ben was clearly headed in the wrong direction in life. Today, he inspires and saves lives.

The Conference week begins with pre-conference tours of Baltimore, Washington, Annapolis, Gettysburg, and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The substance of ACEI 2000 will include exciting Educational Explorations (school visits) and more than 250 sessions, workshops, and research presentations. Maryland Night will be a 3-hour cruise of the Chesapeake Bay, including a spectacular Maryland dinner buffet and dancing.

Among the informative sessions offered will be these, which focus on some aspect of middle school education.

Nurturing Resiliency in Children:
Teachers As Anchors in a Troubled World
Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX

Providing Family Support in the Educational Village:
A College-Community Partnership
Salem State College, Salem, MA

Ag in the Classroom: It's "Ag-citing!"
A New Role for Families, Schools, and Communities
Arkansas State University, State University, AR

Number Friendly Solutions to the
"I Don't Get It" Mystery
Cloverly Elementary School, Silver Spring, MD

Developmentally Appropriate Multicultural
Education for Young Adolescents
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Cultivating Character Through Curriculum
Messiah College, Grantham, PA

Teachers Use Service-Learning Action Research
Projects To Empower Homeless Students and Families
University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC

Drawing Isn't Just "Fun" for "Little Kids":
Using Drawing To Support the Writing of Students
With Language Disabilities
Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA

Moving Beyond the Usual Way of Solving Social
Problems Among Children with Role Modeling/Drama
Kenner, LA

Creating Classrooms of Peace
Hamline University, St. Paul, MN

planting seeds of volunteerism

Last spring, in a greenhouse on the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota, students planted over 180 hanging baskets that eventually became a summer splash of color along the Nicollet Mall shopping area in downtown Minneapolis. Students also were involved in other plant beautification projects: planting on the state capitol grounds in St. Paul, beautifying an inner-city neighborhood, and planting flowers around Habitat for Humanity houses. Flower plugs were donated by local greenhouses and nurtured in school GrowLabs before they were planted.

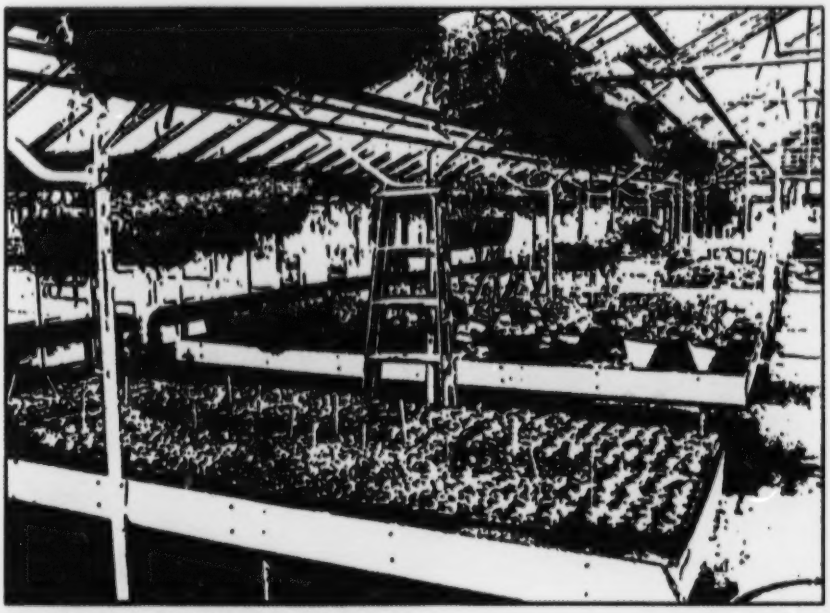
This very special program is called Kids, Education, the Environment and You (KEEY), which was started by John Solberg, age 83, a retired insurance agent. The program has grown over the past eight years and now includes 40,000 students and their teachers in more than 80 schools. To read more about the KEEY program, point your Web browser to an archival article from the University of Minnesota student newspaper: http://www.daily.umn.edu/daily/1999/03/08/news/flower/.

In April, the KEEY program was selected as one of twenty five 1999 Minnesota Star Award recipients from the National Youth Leadership Council. The program was selected as an outstanding example of service and service-learning practice and was recognized at the Minnesota Service Recognition Day Celebration on April 14th on the campus of Concordia University in St. Paul.

My students and I attended the awards program sponsored by eight organizations, including the Minnesota Governor's Office. We shared information on preparation, planning, reflection, implementation, and evaluation of the program so that others could benefit from our experience. All of the 25 state projects were on display during the recognition celebration. Later that month, Attorney General Janet Reno visited the Twin Cities, and KEEY students passed out geraniums to the people attending a breakfast meeting where she spoke.

Service learning empowers youth to take an active role in their community, using strategies to develop academic skills, responsibility, and character, and to help them become involved citizens. Think about getting your students involved in community innovation and action.

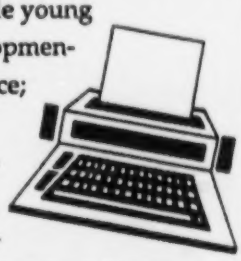
— M. J. Savaiano, Vice President, Middle Childhood



Greenhouse at the University of Minnesota

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Middle School* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on young adolescents and effective middle level school practices. Topics may include young adolescent development and developmentally appropriate educational practice; descriptions of materials and programs; suggestions for implementing middle school concepts, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, and exploratory programs; issues affecting young adolescents; and challenges facing at-risk populations.



Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Middle School* Editor:

Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University,
P.O. Box 5774, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5774.

Focus on Middle School

Winter 1999, Vol. 12, No. 2

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17904 Georgia Ave., Ste. 215
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Spring 2000 • Vol. 12, No. 3

Focus on Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Theme

The middle school experience leaves its mark on students. As the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development pointed out in 1989, the middle years offer both a wonderful opportunity to recapture "youth adrift," as well as the frightening prospect of exacerbating "the problems of young adolescents" (p. 8). For good or ill, the years students spend "in the middle" can have a powerful impact.

What about the professionals involved in the middle school experience? I addressed this question to several outstanding educators who experienced the transition from a classic junior high model to a middle school model, and who later left the middle school for other positions in education. I wanted to know how these professionals viewed the mark of middle school on their professional lives.

The educators featured here all worked together in the early 1980s to transform a Montana junior high school into a middle school. They experienced both victories and setbacks, of course. Because I was a young teacher involved in the transition, I had the good for-

continued on page 3 . . .

The Mark of Middle School Teaching at the High School Level

James H. Thompson
Bozeman High School, Bozeman, Montana

I remember distinctly the moment when our junior high school began abandoning its "little high school" philosophy in favor of a middle school concept. Our principal stood before us, introducing a radical plan involving schools within schools, teaching clusters, and a convoluted schedule that seemed an invitation to disaster.

Staff reaction to the proposal was mixed. The old-timers, needless to say, were against it, but even the less doctrinaire had serious reservations. To virtually every staff member it appeared that we were leaving the academic high road to pursue some fuzzy, feel-good dream.

That was 17 years ago. Most of my doubts surrounding middle school methods have been long since assuaged. In fact, as a high school English teacher, I continue to employ some of the techniques I learned in that "kinder and gentler" middle school environment.

The day our principal introduced the middle school model, he employed a striking metaphor: To be successful middle school teachers, he said, we must be funambulists—tightrope walkers. In other words, we must continue to address academic needs while engaging our students as people. To achieve this balancing act, we would need to monitor the students' social interactions and emotional growth, as well as their grades. We were to be especially alert for kids who had a hard time fitting in.

I could tell that the more academically oriented teachers among

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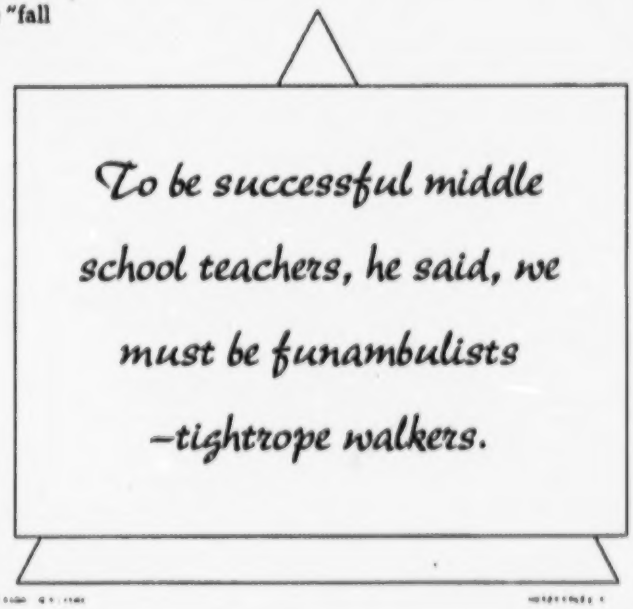
us resisted this role as teacher-adviser; their objection, it appeared to me, was to the increased personal spin being imparted on what had been a clean, uncluttered teacher-pupil relationship. The challenge, however, was clear: In order to identify and assist those kids who might otherwise "fall through the cracks," we'd have to get to know them better.

Years have passed since those middle school days when we first began measuring student progress in terms other than simple academic achievement. Yet continuing this "middle school" approach with my high school students has yielded positive returns for them and me. First, letters of introduction are a standard part of my junior and senior English classes. I tell them a bit about me, then have them write brief autobiographies. I make an effort to remember who's in which activity, who's working the late shift at Taco Bell, and what paths they'll be taking upon graduation. I use this knowledge to recommend particular books or research topics, or to cut Mr. Taco Bell some slack if I know he's slaving until midnight. Kids are like everyone else; they appreciate the interest. Middle school teaching helped me to see that.

It became clear to me back in those early middle school years that taking a personal interest in kids was not only effective, but also easy. A far more difficult challenge for us "in the middle" was relinquishing curricular turf. At my middle school, the process began with great fanfare: We were placed into interdisciplinary teaching clusters with orders to dissolve the conventional separation among English, science, math, and social studies. Units would be taught in a grand, symphonic collaboration among the cluster teachers. Given the well-established territorial design of curricula ("Don't even <u>think</u> about using *Red Badge of Courage* in your history class!"), our fledgling middle school was in for a jarring experience.

Throughout the darker moments of that first middle school year, I was haunted by Robert Frost's caveat about good fences making good neighbors. Accordingly, I was alarmed when the science teacher included mythology in a lesson. With time, however, I realized how efficient and how *natural* it was for kids to learn about the ancient Greeks from a corps of teachers. An additional benefit of such teaming was being able to communicate our concerns about a student through one phone call home. We planned together, shared information on students, and developed what coaches would probably call team spirit. In short, we became a teaching family.



My transfer to the high school could have ended all that. After all, high schools feature such Byzantine scheduling and diverse course offerings that the opportunities for team teaching and other kinds of collaboration seem few. Many of the teachers here began their careers in middle school, however, and we eagerly "team" whenever possible. During my drama unit featuring *Twelve Angry Men*, for example, a government teacher (my former middle school cluster partner) comes in to lecture on Fifth Amendment rights. Last week, I helped the science teacher as he had his biology students describe the food chain—using poetry! While this kind of collaboration doesn't approach the teaching "family" we enjoyed at the middle school, my experience at the middle school has prepared me to use opportunities for tearing down artificial curricular barriers.

Learning To Focus

Nancy Vandeventer, Wallace School District, Wallace, Idaho

If I hadn't been a middle school teacher and a middle school administrator, what kind of superintendent of a Pre-K-12 district would I be?

- I would wear beige instead of red.
- I would do things just like they always have been done as long as nothing appeared to be broken.
- I would go so slowly that the community, students, and staff would think that my predecessor had merely made a name change.
- I would have been content to be a principal.

For almost 16 years before I became a middle school principal, I was a middle school teacher. I made the leap from the classroom to the principal's office without the interim steps of athletic director, coach, or vice principal that many of my male counterparts have learned and perfected.

I leapt into a New England school that was *middle* in name only, and I called John Lounsbury and James Garvin to help me organize the school for middle level instruction. I moved too fast for everyone because it seemed like a perfectly simple thing for me to do—if it doesn't work, stop and change it. Make it better for students. It has taken me 12 years to temper the pace and breathe tolerance and patience into my leadership style, because middle school teaching taught me how to take risks.

Being a superintendent is very risky. *Education Week* and the *American School Board Journal* recently examined why less than 12 percent of all superintendents are women. When I became a middle school principal, less than 3 percent of the superintendents across the United States were women.

. . . continued from page 1

tune of learning much about children, teaching, and schools from these and other colleagues. The educators who write in this issue of *Focus on Middle School* all left the middle school, but not without first having learned a great deal. Jim Thompson, a middle school English teacher, decided to continue his career as a high school teacher. Nancy Vandeventer, an English and speech teacher at the middle level, went on to serve as principal and currently is a superintendent of a school district in Idaho. Jan Ophus, the principal who guided our school's transition, moved on to be principal in several high schools.

The common thread is what is important here. I am confident that I am a better teacher today (at the university) because of the mark of the middle school. These professionals offer their views on how working at the middle level has marked them.

—DK

Middle school gave me the courage to pioneer. It gave me a way to look at Pre-K-5 for what was expected, and it fortified me to challenge the sedentary bastion of 9-12 high schools. In my position, I serve as a role model for young women and for practicing teachers in our district.

I agree with John Lounsbury (see *Focus on Middle School*, Fall 1999) that the team concept may mean the survival of public education. For middle school to go the next level, however, we must teach the team to "team" and give them individual and team preparation periods within the work day. At first glance it is expensive—until you figure that the first line of discipline is the team. The weekly connection with parents and the community is through the team. The conference-building skill to empower students to "run their own showcases" starts at the team level.

I cannot wave my magical whammy-jammy stick over the heads of veteran teachers and chant, "Team! Team! Team!" Best practices evolve. Middle school teaming opens those doors more quickly than does continuing the isolation in the self-contained elementary classroom or the high school science class. If we encourage "teacher talk" and honor the activity called "reflection," we will begin to slowly accept that *change is the status quo*.

I am guided by a "pundle poem" I made up during my principal training that still reflects my philosophy, a philosophy marked by experience in the middle:

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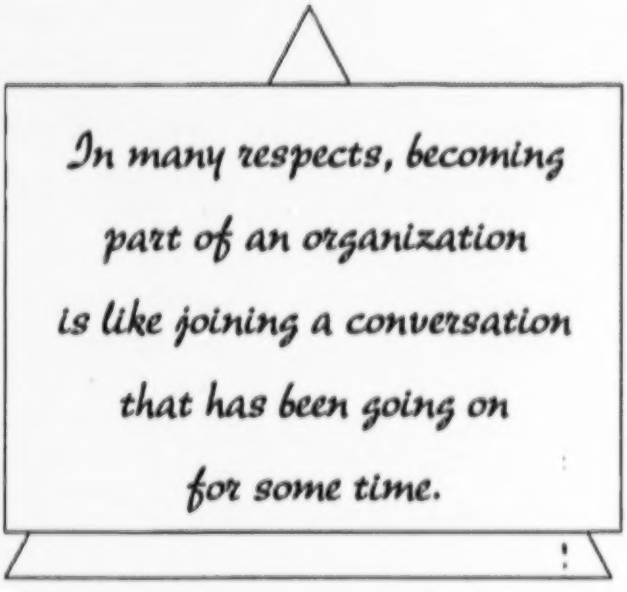
Simply put, *focus on the student in transition*. No matter where she or he is in the learning process, stop and take stock of the individual. Then, design for how the learning process comes together for all the learners in a given opportunity. We teachers must weave a new tapestry at every instructional opportunity. *Middle school teaches us to do the appropriate thing*. It isn't too late for other educators to do the right thing! All the years I taught, I knew that students needed to be met and greeted by name as they entered the door to our classroom. All the years I've been in education, students have needed to know that we care before they care what we know. That is not different today. In my current district, it is our mission...*personal-level learning*! This phrase, a student's contribution, is our district's promise. It's a promise that I've carried away from the middle school.

When Life Was Bigger

Jan Ophus, North Bend High School, North Bend, Oregon

"The middle school years were my Renasanse [sic] years. I felt more stuff in my life. I was bigger. My favorite class is gym, because you get to run free and get healthy. I like basketball, because it's fun and I'm quick."



I have been a principal going on 21 years now, having served four different schools in two quite different states—a 7-12 junior/senior high with barely 200 students, a 7-9 junior high with 1,100 students, and two 4-year high schools with enrollments between 900 and 950. Each school was unique, and they've all provided me with special personal and professional experiences. Looking back over a career that is close to its end, however, I know that my 10-year principalship in Bozeman Junior High School will accompany me into retirement as the exemplar of what *"it" was really all about*—an ennobling purpose, a team of outstanding individuals who share that purpose, and a position that allows one simultaneously to realize and develop one's own talents.

In many respects, becoming part of an organization is like joining a conversation that has been going on for some time. The basic variables that affect a principal who is new to a school are, therefore, these: 1) the participants in that conversation, which is to say the faculty and, to a lesser degree, the staff, students, and parents; 2) the topics of the conversation, or what is generally on folks' minds at the time, together with all the prior discussions that now shape their daily behaviors in the forms of rules and practices; and 3) the principal's personal capacity to add interesting aspects to that ongoing stream of shared meaning and resultant activity.

I joined Bozeman Junior High School's "conversation" at just the right time. A typical vintage 1980 junior high in most outward respects, it was also a school where the de facto leadership was beginning to have discussions that would lead to significant institutional change. I recall Ted Carter, a 6'7" social studies teacher/ex-coach who had spent more than 25 years at BJHS, saying: "You know, I've been claiming for years that it's a wonder kids don't leave us with one arm longer than the other—they have to carry so much homework home! I'm really noticing it this year now that my daughter's here. Can't we figure out a way for teachers, 'specially the 7th-grade teach-

ers, to coordinate the homework they assign?"

Ted's remark about "coordination" somehow gave the rest of us permission to begin talking about and further researching the "schools-within-a-school" concept, which led to novel discussions about how teachers might collaborate and how students might more fully experience the rewards of teamwork and a "learning community." This process, in turn, allowed ideas related to multi-disciplinary instruction and thematic units to surface.

And, too, in a very important way, Ted's underlying concern for what was perhaps the unique nature of a 7th-grader brought about an interest in the concept of the "transescent" and what we came to think of as the unique learning needs and developmental status of early adolescents.

At its worst, this newfound understanding put us on the trail to the thoroughly disreputable notion of "brain-growth periodization"; at its best, it caused us to appreciate the individuality of the learner to an extent we had not experienced before and to recognize that there are, indeed, stages through which we all as learners *and* as individual human beings must pass. Many of our teachers began searching for ways to enhance their teaching repertoires so as to meet the needs of *all* their learners. Authors Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers came to our school and shared their *Models of Teaching* strategies. Nancy Vandeventer edited an in-house newsletter in which she and her colleagues shared successful teaching strategies and lessons. Teachers refined newly acquired skills by engaging in peer coaching activities.

We had a terrific bunch of teachers. The "Teds" of the faculty, unsentimental but ultimately student-oriented teachers who were beginning to have reservations about the wisdom of educating junior high age students as if they were "just short high school kids," joined forces with the likes of Lance Johnson (a one-time Montana Elementary Math Teacher of the Year), Nancy, Dan, Mary Ellen, Bob, Jim, Joann, and all the others to create a genuine "middle school."

"The middle school years were my Renasanse [sic] years. I felt more stuff in my life. I was bigger. My favorite class is gym, because you get to run free and get healthy. I like basketball, because it's fun and I'm quick." So wrote 7th-grader Rob M. on September 28, 1989, in his response to an assignment we gave to the students in our in-school suspension room. I put Rob's paper in a picture frame when I left Bozeman Junior High and have displayed that frame prominently in every office I've occupied since.

We need to keep the person of the individual learner always uppermost in mind.

The charm of Rob's expression and the enormous personal insight that he exercised remind me to keep the *person* of the individual learner always uppermost in mind. This 7th-grader's words also, all these years later, help me remember a time when—working collaboratively with some great educators who shared a vision of what was good for both kids and professionals—I, too, felt more stuff in my life, and I, too, was bigger!

From the Vice President

raising reading expectations

As you may know, this past year I accepted a position as K-6 Coordinator of the Museum Magnet School, which is a partnership with the St. Paul School District and the Science Museum of Minnesota. The mission of the Museum Magnet School is to use the full resources of the museum to nurture creative thinkers who can work cooperatively to solve problems.

In addition to using this partnership in a variety of ways for all of our students, we are improving reading skills and creating a "culture of reading" among at-risk youngsters with two unique mentoring programs, both of which are proving very beneficial to all involved. Research shows that children who read often increase their vocabulary and become better writers and students. As educators, we know that good communication skills are critical to students' self-esteem, their success in school, and their future work opportunities.

Science Museum employees are currently volunteering time each week to meet with designated students to do paired reading and some writing, and to work on developmentally appropriate comprehension and vocabulary skills. Within this model, a designated student has four different tutors each week. The selected weekly tasks are coordinated and monitored by a staff person. With this intense academic engagement, the four tutors help one child to succeed at a time. These children look forward to their one-on-one experiences as they build relationships with positive, caring role models. The tutors equally enjoy the opportunity to share their knowledge and build an ongoing relationship with a young person.

Another excellent mentoring program at our school was started four years ago with University of Minnesota students. Twice weekly for an hour, about 50 preservice teachers work with children who are in need of reading tutoring. Known as the "Rise and Read" program, parents must arrange special transportation to get their children to school by 8:00 a.m. in order to take part in this unique one-on-one tutoring opportunity.

As a way of saying "thanks," the Science Museum of Minnesota offers volunteers exhibit and show passes, once the volunteers have tutored a certain number of hours. These two reading tutoring programs are excellent examples of community and school partnerships. For information on the Science Museum of Minnesota or the St. Paul School System, visit the Web sites at www.smm.org and www.spps.org, respectively. Learn about what children should know and be able to do in key knowledge areas, get some teaching ideas, and find additional Internet resources.

—Maria "M.J." Savaiano, Vice President
Representing Intermediate/Middle Childhood

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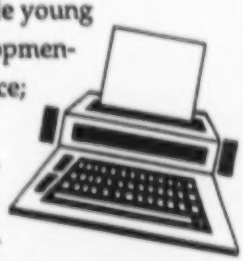
Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Middle School* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on young adolescents and effective middle level school practices. Topics may include young adolescent development and developmentally appropriate educational practice; descriptions of materials and programs; suggestions for implementing middle school concepts, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, and exploratory programs; issues affecting young adolescents; and challenges facing at-risk populations.



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Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University,
P.O. Box 5774, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-5774.

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Spring 2000, Vol. 12, No. 3

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Summer 2000 • Vol. 12, No. 4

Focus On Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Oral History

Local communities are rich with opportunities to extend learning beyond the school. Using community resources, students can listen to the experiences and personal memories of older citizens, study public and private records, or visit historic sites. The community can become an arena for active learning, and educators should use it more.

An oral history project creates an added dimension to the school curriculum and provides students with practical, real-life experiences. Oral history is an established research procedure used by historians to gather and preserve memories and knowledge of living people about the past (Sitton, Mehaffy, & Davis, 1983). Oral histories allow student to understand vicariously what life was like in the past by interviewing longtime residents of the community. Textbooks, on the other hand, provide the sequencing of dates, names, relationships, and causes of past events.

A classroom oral history project is characterized by two key elements. First, oral history is an active approach to the study of the past. Students are working historians engaged in live research. Second, an oral history project requires students to pursue information outside of school.

continued on page 6 . . .

Hitting Our Own Trees

Daniel L. Kain,
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff

When I was a young adolescent, our family spent much of our summer vacation in a cabin in northern Montana. Our place was well off the main highway, down a bumpy dirt road that snaked through a thick forest—a road that became impassable in winter and nearly impassable in any rain. Our family times there were a mixture of maintaining the cabin, enjoying the glorious Montana surroundings, and mingling with the fascinating collection of characters who actually lived in this isolated area.

One such character was a kind, flamboyant man named Milton. On a summer night, more than a little tipsy from the effects of a long card game oiled with drink, Milton left our cabin for his own place up the road. He returned early the next morning to light the wood stove and warm our cabin, as he always did. He announced to the groggy inhabitants that "someone hit your tree." Too sleepy to worry, we all ignored Milton. But later, we walked down the road and saw what he was talking about: a fir tree near the edge of the primitive trail had its bark scraped off, and it seemed to be leaning more than it had been the day before. We noticed something else. The right front fender of Milton's truck was dented and scratched. "You hit it," my dad laughed. "Don't tell my wife," was Milton's response.

The incident was doubly ironic. First, Milton, in his excitement to bring us the news of the damaged tree, didn't realize that he was the culprit. And second, the tree he hit was just as much his as ours—it was a tree in the common forest that we all shared.

Milton's story is, of course, an analogy to something we face in the middle school. As teachers, we are generally in the driver's seat, and we may, at times, unwittingly damage the forest we are

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hoping to nurture. The analogy is an invitation for us to contemplate what ways we may have hit our own trees as we tackle the important business of educating young adolescents.

Hitting Our Own Trees: Curriculum

I recently asked a group of middle school students what their biggest concern about school was. Their choral response to my question, as we might guess, was that school was "boring." While school is not designed merely to entertain children, we must ask ourselves what we are doing to make learning—one of the great adventures of life—seem so dull and lifeless.

Part of the answer to that question can be found in the curriculum we offer. Far too often, this curriculum is remote from the lives of the students, irrelevant to their current concerns. They see little reason for learning the things we ask them to learn, and this disconnect creates an adversarial relationship. We're hitting our own trees, instead of providing nurture. Does it have to be this way?

James Beane (1990, 1997), John Lounsbury and Gordon Vars (Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Vars, 1987), and others have reminded us for years that curriculum can connect to the lives and motivations of our students. Indeed, as long ago as 1938, Harold Alberty argued that schooling in a democracy must connect to children's current lives. A school that takes this charge seriously

> is apt to find that conventional subject-matter areas, textbooks, daily assignments, standardized methods and equipment are wholly inadequate. Activities tend to escape the bounds of 'subjects'; textbooks-to-be-mastered may be useful tools in the solving of problems, but no longer serve as a guide; daily assignments give way to long-range, cooperative planning; drill, appreciation, and thinking can no longer be thought of as falling into separate categories, but rather become inseparably merged. . . . In short, the classroom becomes a laboratory where purposes are conceived and carried to fruition, rather than a place where lessons are to be learned.
>
> (Alberty, 1938, p. 127)

Alberty's comments call for a realignment of curriculum, a sharing of planning with the students, and a reduction in the emphasis on coverage. If we are to nurture rather than damage our "trees," we must begin to see the curriculum as a cooperative venture, in which we share expertise and authority with students. The curriculum must be more than a set of facts and skills we "cover." In fact, as Wiggins and McTighe (1998) point out, we should be more interested in guiding our students to ask and answer important questions in order to *uncover* the curriculum. The potential for student growth—from whatever starting point—is greater if we work to make the curriculum an opportunity for students to inquire at varying levels (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Tomlinson, 1999).

They see little reason for learning the things we ask them to learn, and this disconnect creates an adversarial relationship. Does it have to be this way?

Someone will no doubt object that such ideas are appealing but fanciful, not fit for the real world of standards and standardized tests and accountability. Fair enough. We need to address this question, to turn it into the stuff of faculty meeting debates and system-wide inquiry into what our schools do for our students. The standards movement should not become a justification for irrelevant and artificial curriculum practices. As James Beane puts it, "The standards movement is aimed

at mastery of content from various subject areas, not the use of knowledge in relation to real-life issues or the integration of knowledge that is necessary for real-life situations" (1997, p. 92). Furthermore, evidence suggests that offering students a more integrated curriculum will not lower test scores (Vars, 1991).

Hitting Our Own Trees: Assessment

Assessment represents one of those role conflicts—or potential role conflicts—we face as teachers. We work hard to become the nurturing, caring professionals needed to support young adolescents, but our role also moves us into the position of judge. Students sometimes feel betrayed as they try to reconcile teacher as advocate and teacher as judge.

We hit our trees in assessment when our practices discourage learning. Consider one middle school teacher's actions. This teacher assigned a science report for students to create. Students were given a description of the task, which involved a poster display of certain information. Students also received a list of criteria, and helpful guidance on how to put together the posters. The task was made more relevant and interesting through the public display of posters. However, when it came time to score the student work, the teacher did not systematically mark student work according to the criteria, but allowed students to vote on the grades for their classmates' work. Predictably, students who were well-liked or outgoing scored high; students who were quiet or whom others viewed as unpleasant were scored low. The criteria for performance became completely irrelevant in this context.

By ignoring criteria and marking students' work for any other features, we teach our students that assessment is capricious, unfair, and unconnected to their own efforts and skills. It makes assessment mysterious and takes away the children's sense of efficacy. It's hitting our own trees, marring our own forest.

Of course, we must also be careful about a cold adherence to valid assessment without considering the idea of "consequential validity." One of my own middle school students helped me to see this. I had assigned my students to do a book report in the form of a poster that advertised the book as if it were transformed into a movie. Like the teacher in the above example, I provided my students with a set of criteria to guide their work and my grading. Unlike that teacher, I thought I had done a fairly good job of using the criteria to score student projects.

On the day the project scores were given out, however, Vance appeared at my door just after the hallways had emptied and quiet settled over the building. He wanted to know why he had received a C on his project. He explained that he had worked very hard on it, and that he was proud of what he had done. I listened to this 7th-grader, who by today's standards would certainly have been identified as having a learning disability, and then calmly explained how his work matched all the criteria for a C. I watched as tears filled Vance's eyes, and he walked away from my room crying, muttering, "but I worked so hard." Of course I was "right." I had scored him fairly by the criteria. But if ever there was a moment in teaching where I could get a "take back," it would be this one. In not acknowledging Vance's efforts, I hit my own tree. Rewarding his efforts on this assignment would not

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have altered Vance's grade, but it may have made school less of a place of failure for him.

The examples above just touch the fringes of the assessment issue. Do we use grades to control behavior? Do our grading practices for group work discourage some learners, while encouraging others to shirk their duties? We need to make space to discuss our practices in light of helping students to learn.

Hitting Our Own Trees: Classroom Environment

A third area that invites contemplation is the general realm of classroom environments. As we create a place of learning and growth for young adolescents, are there things we do that may actually cause more harm than good?

Perhaps negative examples are too easily available. We all know of teachers at the extremes, ones who permit such chaos that classrooms feel unsafe or ones who rule with a meanness in their authority. Some teachers manage to insert cruelty in what passes for instruction. Consider this example from Rothstein (1987):

> "Jerry asked me why I keep calling many of you 'disadvantaged.' I'm going to show you why. Jerry, please stand. Can you see what I have in my hand?"
> "Yes."
> "What is it called?"
> "Called?"
> "Yes, its name?"
> "It holds the books together on your desk."
> "I know that Jerry. . . but what's it called?"
> "Called?"
> "Its name?"
> "It holds books together. Isn't that enough?"
> "No, that's not enough. This has a name. It's called a 'bookend.' A 'bookend.' See what I mean? Here you are in junior high school and you don't know that this is called a 'bookend.' I knew that when I was 5 years old!" (pp. 61-62)

A more powerful perspective for us to consider is the damage well-meaning, caring teachers may do in trying to create positive environments.

While Rothstein's (1987) example demonstrates how a mean-spirited person can damage children, a more powerful perspective for us to consider is the damage well-meaning, caring teachers may do in trying to create positive environments. It's the question, again, of hitting our own trees.

Consider, first, the messages we send through the management practices we adopt. Suppose we choose a system that has a strong record of success, such as Assertive Discipline (Canter & Canter, 1992). We may find our classrooms become more orderly, but that in itself is not the only mark of success. What happens to learning? Do the children learn more, appreciate our subjects more? Do they learn lessons we may not have intended, such as the idea that someone "ought" to reward them for behaving appropriately? I am not suggesting that there is a single self-evident answer here. I am suggesting that we owe it to our students to consider choices about management at a level beyond whether these choices get compliance from the students.

One of my mentors, from before I started teaching, taught me an interesting lesson in controlling others' behavior. He was the manager at a movie theater where I worked. On Friday evenings, our theater generally had a strong concentration of young adolescents—we called it junior high night. The kids had a lot of fun, but it was unbear-

able for other patrons. So my mentor showed me the solution. At the beginning of the previews for upcoming films, he would march down to the front of the auditorium and select two young people to eject from the theater. He would do so in a dramatic, noisy fashion. The audience grew instantly quiet and well-behaved. I asked him what kids he threw out and why. He told me it didn't matter, as long as they were near front. And it's true that his "junior high nights" were the calmest of anyone's. Of course, we must question whether getting a quiet audience is worth the injustice of falsely accusing others.

While the movie example is relatively trivial compared to the power of lessons learned daily in school, it does provide us with a questioning perspective. Do our practices, even if they attain the orderly environments we may seek, teach children that power is arbitrary and beyond challenge? Do we create situations where we show the future decision-makers of our nation that they don't really count?

Beyond questions of classroom control, do our routines and procedures help students to see that they have a voice and a responsibility in their education? If nurturing this forest of learners is our goal, then we need to consider how our practices are damaging the forest. Where is the mark of the student community in our classrooms? For example, do we give students the sort of ownership that makes *them* the ones to welcome new students into class? Does the student returning from an absence know she can turn to her community of classmates for the details of what she has missed rather than depending solely on the teacher? Do we create a place where students' goals are made legitimate components of the classroom scene? Even as simple an issue as the use of bulletin boards and decorations offers chances for students to help create an environment that is theirs. Yet many teachers feel the need to have a sharp-looking classroom, and cannot relinquish control. Of course the room will look better if teachers control all decisions, but where will students learn to take ownership in their schooling? Do our practices and the environment we create help students become independent learners and responsible citizens who can connect to the community?

Pruning Trees?

Unlike the random shaping of storm and drought in the forest, a gardener's trees can be enhanced and strengthened through careful pruning. My analogy has not been meant to advocate relinquishing our responsibilities. Just the opposite. The work we do with middle school students is so important, such a heavy responsibility, that we must help each other develop a collective conscience to assist in doing what is best for young adolescents. In open dialogue, we can help uncover elements of our practices and institutions that may seem to be doing the job, but are in fact damaging our own trees.

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. . . *continued from page 1*

Ultimately, most oral history projects produce a historiography that preserves the knowledge and heritage of the local community. The format for these final projects varies. Some students make radio broadcasts; others develop a collection of taped interviews for local libraries. Newspaper series, magazine articles, video programs, multimedia CD-ROMs, and Web sites are additional alternatives.

Oral history projects are a natural way to integrate knowledge (content), skills, and attitudes. Students expand and strengthen their reading and research abilities as they gather the background information needed to conduct a successful project. Written language skills, including spelling, grammar, and composition, also are refined. Students must work through the writing process of drafting, revising, restructuring, and editing as they prepare transcribed interviews for print. Oral communication and interpersonal skills are also an integral part of an oral history project (Kazemek, 1985; Smith, 1990). When using both the community and school as a classroom, students interact with a wide range of people and practice speaking and listening skills.

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What Happens in a Classroom Oral History Project?

• Students and teachers must first determine an era, event, or theme on which to focus. Students can examine local historical markers, plaques, or cornerstones. They may investigate eras in the town's history or significant individuals in the town's development. Museum displays offer further topics to be studied. Local newspapers may be a useful source.

• After the subject is selected, students begin their research. Textbooks and reference books are in-school sources, but old diaries, ledgers, letters, and other memorabilia available in the community will give students a broader perspective on the subject. Pupils need to research the topic before interviewing local citizens if they are to ask pertinent and productive questions.

• Next, students identify local citizens who have information about the era, event, or topic of study and secure an interview appointment. Then, the students compose interview questions. Broad, open-ended questions are best, such as "What favorite memories do you have of your classmates and school?" or "Tell me how the families in your town celebrated special holidays when you were young." After the interview, student must validate what they learned with information from additional resources and other interviews.

• If an oral history magazine is a project goal, students must transcribe the interview tape. This process is time-consuming, but more manageable if two students work together. Parent volunteers can assist. The transcription will need extensive editing, revising, and polishing. Students will rearrange, restructure, and discard content until the composition is ready.

• The actual printing of the magazine offers many opportunities for students to gain an understanding of the printing process. Many printers will work directly with students and teach them the steps to prepare camera-ready copy. Or students can produce the magazine themselves using a desktop publishing program. For wider dissemination, students can create a Web page. They can even use the Internet to conduct interviews.

excerpted from Baber, C. R. (1997). Oral history: Engaging students in community-based learning. In B. Hatcher & S. S. Beck (Eds.), Learning opportunities beyond the school (2nd ed., pp. 51-55). Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.

museum exhibits: a model for student engagement

What would you imagine a museum school to be like? Do you envision a classroom filled with mounted animals and collections of shells and leaves? Do you envision students going to a local museum with notebooks in hand, ready to draw and collect data? The term "museum school" is unfamiliar to many people. While museum and school partnerships are proliferating, museum schools represent an intense level of commitment that relatively few museums have yet to undertake.

The Museum Magnet School in St. Paul, Minnesota, houses 385 children from kindergarten through 6th grade. The atrium is the focal point of the school, where visitors will find a variety of artifacts and specimens from the Science Museum's teaching and loan collections, including mounted bears and hawks, full-sized replicas of Mayan stone sculptures, a hang glider, and trees bent by the force of hurricane winds. The children's exhibits are also on display in the atrium, in the specially designed school Exhibit Hall, in hallway vitrines, and in classroom exhibit cases. These student-designed exhibits form the heart of the museum school. We are creating a museum by kids, for kids. It is a collaborative venture involving students, teachers, museum staff, parents, and community resource people.

Museum Magnet School students from all grades work together on one or two major thematic exhibits each year. One is based on residencies at the Science Museum, focusing on a particular gallery. The other is an all-school event. The January all-school exhibit, Ball Olympics, was a festive event and well attended by families, St. Paul Schools Superintendent Patricia Harvey, other school district personnel, and Science Museum of Minnesota staff. The project illustrated the museum process of exploring, experimenting, explaining, and exhibiting. The school staff met to brainstorm possible ways to integrate that process into the Ball Olympics theme. Two core classes for each grade, taught by artist in residence Jan Elftmann and me, helped provide a foundation for the children. They explored this topic by observing bouncing and rolling balls on a variety of surfaces, taking and recording data on graphs, and sharing this information with others. Museum Magnet students began to understand, and even question, the physics of what they observed.

After a winter recess homework activity to design a roller coaster track using a hand-made clay ball and poster paper, students were ready to work in small groups to create various events for their favorite balls. Grades 3-6 created various collaborative Ball Olympics events. Second-graders displayed a variety of balls, some of them cut in two, in the atrium area. All of the students had an opportunity to look at the displays and try out the events. Students learned by creating a hands-on activity and shared the information and knowledge they gained. Students created their own criteria for an interesting exhibit:

- Could be shared with others
- Had pictures showing people making the exhibit
- Had students explaining and sharing ideas
- Was colorful and interactive
- Had something short to read with big titles and details about the exhibit
- Helped you to discover how things worked
- Had enough new information so that you were not bored
- Was fun and gave you new ideas to do at home.

These attributes of a quality exhibit demonstrate what the students learned through using the museum process. The museum process bridges the gap between formal and informal learning by giving children an opportunity to apply academic skills to authentic challenges, projects, collections, demonstrations, and performances that communicate ideas to others.

Museums, dedicated to the concept of lifelong learning, are in an excellent position to help schools develop these kinds of authentic, real-world challenges for students. Perhaps your school will choose to form a partnership with a local museum.

This is my last article as Vice President. I am honored to have served ACEI in this capacity. I congratulate Jeanie Burnett on being elected as our new Vice President for Intermediate/Middle Childhood. I invite you to consider becoming involved in ACEI committee work. I know you will enjoy it.

—M. J. Savaiano, Vice President, Representing Intermediate/Middle Childhood

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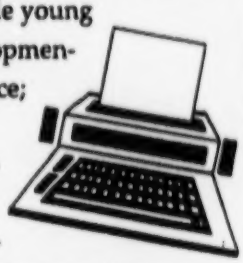

Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Middle School* Editor:

Daniel L. Kain,
Instructional Leadership,
Northern Arizona University,
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Summer 2000, Vol. 12, No. 4

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